

## READER'S GUIDE

### Reclaiming Polly Bemis: China's Daughter, Idaho's Legendary Pioneer

When I set out to reclaim the life of Idaho's legendary Polly Bemis in 1979, I had no training in research and very little experience. "Don't worry," a psychic told me. "She's holding your hand." Two years later, *Thousand Pieces of Gold* was completed and published.<sup>1</sup> But I have yet to stop work on reclaiming the life of Polly Bemis, born Lalu Nathoy.

#### *Beginnings*

I first came across Lalu/Polly in Sister Mary Alfreda Elsensohn's *Idaho Chinese Lore*.<sup>2</sup> Even in this brief sketch, Lalu/Polly struck me as extraordinary, for she had not only overcome great hardships but had survived with her humanity intact, her spirit undiminished. To me, her life cried out for a book-length biography, and I wrote to libraries and historical societies throughout the Pacific Northwest for anything they might have about her.

Back came numerous photographs, newspaper and magazine articles, a pioneer's unpublished mem-

## READER'S GUIDE

oir, references in books, and a master's thesis. The wealth of material was gratifying. Unfortunately, there were many conflicting "facts" and huge gaps of information, especially about her life in China. It soon became clear that unless I passed over those years, I could not write a nonfiction book. I felt very strongly that in order to understand Polly in America, it would be crucial for the reader to know about Lalu in China. Instead of a biography, then, I decided to write a biographical novel. That did not mean I was willing to take liberties with the truth. Rather, it meant I threw myself into the kind of intensive research that would, I hoped, help me sort through the disparate facts and fill in the gaps.

I read dozens of books, particularly those dealing with village life, bandits, and the flora and fauna of nineteenth-century Northern China. I studied the crops, when to plant, when to harvest, the various cycles of cultivation, the farm implements used, daily routines, and the holidays and folklore of the area until I knew it as intimately as if I had lived there myself. Similarly, I steeped myself in the history and geography of Idaho, especially of Warrens and the Salmon River, where Polly had lived.

It should be noted that these histories, even those sympathetic to the Chinese, did not include their viewpoint. And one of the many long-range effects of the intense anti-Chinese violence and legislation (both local and national) that prevailed in nineteenth-century America is the complete absence of Chinese

## READER'S GUIDE

pioneers (or descendants) still in the area. But I located white people who had known Polly and went to Idaho to interview them.

Then I began reconstructing Lalu/Polly's life.

### *The Basis for* Thousand Pieces of Gold

Most of what we know about Lalu/Polly's early life can be traced to an interview she gave Countess Eleanor Gizycka in 1922 and three newspaper articles published in the next decade.<sup>3</sup>

From these accounts, it would seem Lalu Nathoy was born on September 11, 1853, in Northern China, near one of the upper rivers, in an area frequently ravaged by bandits.<sup>4</sup> Although Lalu's parents were impoverished farmers, her feet had been bound, then unbound. And when Lalu was eighteen, there was a prolonged drought, during which her father was forced to sell her to bandits in exchange for enough seed to plant another crop that would, he hoped, save the rest of their family from starvation. Since Lalu said she'd been in Shanghai, that may have been her port of departure for the United States.

As to how Lalu came to Warrens, the *Oregonian* claims, "The bandit leader took Polly down the river to one of the big seaport cities, whence he sailed to San Francisco. Soon afterwards the gold rush around Idaho City lured him to Warrens, where he either died or deserted Polly, who operated a restaurant for several years." But Gizycka quotes Polly as say-

## READER'S GUIDE

ing, "Old woman smuggle me into Portland. I cost \$2,500 . . . Old Chinese-man he took me to Warrens in a pack train."<sup>5</sup>

Idaho's gold rush had begun in 1861, and Warrens was one of many "rip-roaring" camps that had sprung up in the territory. As in most camps, Chinese were initially prohibited from holding claims or working as hired men, and it was 1869—seven years after James Warrens had accidentally uncovered gold in the district—before the white miners, believing most of the gold gone, decided by majority vote to allow Chinese into Warrens (now known as Warren).<sup>6</sup>

Mining was then an almost exclusively male activity that involved moving from place to place in search of the most productive site. Few men of any race or nationality brought their families with them, and among the earliest female arrivals were those who hired themselves out for dances or sex—or both. Some of these women were Chinese. Of the Chinese women who labored as prostitutes, however, very few were free agents. Indeed, the majority worked as chattel for masters who had bought them. Beginning in 1861, California passed a series of codes aimed at restricting the importation of Chinese women for prostitution. As a result, the enslaved had to be smuggled in, sometimes "disguised as boys, hidden in buckets of coal, or concealed in padded crates labeled as dishware." Furthermore, losses (through discovery or death) and the need to bribe officials raised the prices for the women, with the sum paid for Lulu

## READER'S GUIDE

on the high side of the one- to three-thousand-dollar range.<sup>7</sup>

Warrens, northeast of McCall, has an elevation of 6,000 feet, and the snow is so deep in winter that it is sometimes completely inaccessible. Not surprisingly, the population has always been greater in summer than in winter. Historically, the population also fluctuated depending on the amount of gold being recovered. Shortly after Chinese were allowed into the camp, they became the majority. Yet they did not live in the town proper but just below in tiny, windowless cabins “not much larger than doghouses.”<sup>8</sup>

The town proper had a single crooked street parallel to the gold-bearing gulch. Each side of this street was lined with saloons, dance halls, bunkhouses, hotels, and stores. All the structures were built of logs—even the floors were hewn logs. Hong King, who had purchased Lalu, was an old man who ran a dance hall/saloon/gambling house here. Charles Bemis, the man she later married, did too. And this is where the pack train must have brought Lalu on July 8, 1872, because “she was greeted by a stranger who said, ‘Here’s Polly,’ as he helped her from the saddle.” Then somebody called for Charlie Bemis to come outside and “introduced the slave girl to him in this way, ‘Charlie, this is Polly.’” Thereafter, Lalu was called Polly.<sup>9</sup>

When recalling her arrival in Warrens, pioneer A. W. Talkington added, “Polly was a good woman and entitled to a good deal of consideration because of her

## READER'S GUIDE

upright conduct in rather difficult circumstances.” Perhaps as part of that consideration, he did not elaborate on those circumstances. Similarly, the articles published in Polly’s lifetime did not delve into her first decade in Warrens. To my knowledge, George Bancroft is the only pioneer who has ever claimed Polly “got money from women’s time-honored methods.” He did not condemn her for it. Indeed, he described her as having “shy, modest ways,” clearly thought highly of her, and considered himself a good friend. But he did not meet her until the early 1900s, and all the pioneers I contacted insisted Polly had never worked as a prostitute, although they acknowledged that she may have been purchased by Hong King for that purpose. As the daughter of Polly’s long-time friend Bertha Long put it, “Polly Nathoy was brought from China to Warrens for the world’s oldest profession. When taken to [Hong King’s] saloon, she was terrified! Charlie Bemis was present and protected her from unwanted advances.”<sup>10</sup> How was Bemis able to accomplish this? Bemis’s “fearless personality, coupled with his skill at shooting, enabled him to maintain order without getting into trouble.”<sup>11</sup>

Just the fact that Bemis was a white man would probably have been sufficient for him to enforce his will on Hong King. During the ten years Chinese had been migrating to the Idaho Territory (mostly from the California gold fields and points along the Central Pacific railroad), they had not only been prohibited from working rich claims but forced to pay a

## READER'S GUIDE

“miner’s tax” of four dollars a month regardless of their occupations. They had also been subjected to random and orchestrated violence throughout the territory. In one camp, children were not allowed out of the house on Saturdays for fear of being accidentally shot by white miners using Chinese for target practice. In Warrens, Chinese did interact with whites—bringing in supplies for both, working in mines operated by whites—and news articles over the years indicate there was limited mingling in some activities, such as Fourth of July celebrations. But a Chinese man accused of stealing a pair of boots was lynched.<sup>12</sup>

Slavery was then against the law, yet Bemis apparently did not challenge Polly’s status as Hong King’s slave. And since she did remain chattel, Polly most likely had to grant Hong King sexual favors as well as do any necessary cooking and cleaning. She must have served drinks to his customers in the saloon, and she may have danced with them, too, despite her peculiar rolling gait (a result of her childhood experience with foot binding).

All the descriptions of Polly in her youth are those of a beauty, and she was renowned even in her old age for her wit and charm. On those occasions when Polly’s wit was not enough to keep her out of trouble or “things got too rough” in Hong King’s saloon, she would call for Bemis, or she would fly out of Hong King’s back door and in through Bemis’s, and “he never failed her.” The back door of Bemis’s saloon

## READER'S GUIDE

opened into his bedroom. Polly, “always industrious and noting the untidiness of her neighbor’s bedroom, used to slip over during the early afternoon to tidy up. This of course pleased Bemis.”<sup>13</sup>

At what point the two became lovers is not known, but by the 1880s they were living together. Polly was not financially dependent on Bemis—she took in laundry from miners and ran a boarding house that Bemis had built for her beside his own, a short distance from his saloon. Where Bemis’s house was a single room, Polly’s boarding house had a small kitchen and a combination sitting/dining room downstairs, a bedroom upstairs. She had taught herself how to cook Western food by watching the white women in Warrens, and young people liked to eat at her place, especially after a dance. Polly had her own inimitable style. When doing laundry, she would mend before she washed. And she once silenced her boarders’ complaints about her coffee by waving a butcher knife while asking, “Who no like my coffee?” Little wonder she seemed to make a lasting impression on everybody who met her, and many of her boarders and their families became her lifelong friends.<sup>14</sup>

Legend has it that Bemis and Hong King were playing poker together one day. Bemis was having a run of good luck, and Hong King, bad luck. Finally, Hong King had nothing left to stake except Polly, which he did, only to lose her as well. Since both Bemis and Hong King were dedicated gamblers, this

## READER'S GUIDE

tale seems plausible. Besides, if there was no poker game, how did Polly get free of Hong King? Bringing Chinese women into the country had become so difficult that men with women already in their possession refused to sell them. It does not seem likely then that Hong King would have allowed Polly—who must have been drawing customers to his saloon with her beauty, wit, and charm—to buy her freedom, let alone give it to her.<sup>15</sup>

There are some who suggest Polly and Bemis married as the result of a poker game in 1890 in which Bemis won \$250 from John Cox, a known troublemaker. The next morning, Cox demanded his money back. Bemis refused. Cox said he'd give Bemis the time it took to roll a cigarette to hand over the cash. If Bemis failed to comply, Cox would shoot his right eye out. When Bemis did not return the money, Cox fired. Luckily, the shot missed Bemis's eye, but it tore into his cheek, shattering the bone. A doctor was quickly sent for. Dr. Bibby, who came eighty-seven miles by horseback from Grangeville, enjoyed a reputation for being dedicated and inventive. The bullet, on striking Bemis's cheekbone, had split, and although Dr. Bibby was able to find and extract one half of the ball and fourteen pieces of bone, he feared the wound would prove fatal from blood poisoning, unless Bemis's system proved strong enough to expel the remaining fragment of the ball.<sup>16</sup>

While there was no Western doctor in Warrens, there were two Chinese, Ah Kan and Lee Dick, who

## READER'S GUIDE

were credited as healers by whites as well as Chinese, and “one of their unusual methods of treatment was the use of mold for the curing of infection.” Whether Polly used this mold or a concoction of her own devising is not known, but she did clean out Bemis’s wound with her crochet hook, then packed it with an “extract of herbs,” and within a month, her patient was sitting up, dressed, able to talk and smoke, although “looking ghastly.” Still the wound continued to discharge pus, and Polly never left Bemis’s side. Finally, she found the remaining piece of bullet embedded in the back of Bemis’s neck and cut it out with a razor.<sup>17</sup>

At least one account of this incident ends with, “Afterward Bemis married her,” as though he did not recognize Polly’s value until she saved his life, or he married her out of gratitude or a sense of obligation. But Bemis and Polly had already been living together for years, and they did not marry for another four.<sup>18</sup>

I believe the true impetus for legalizing their relationship came as a result of the 1892 Geary Act, which required Chinese legally living in the U.S. to carry a certificate of residence at all times. Polly, by her own admission, was in the country illegally, and there was a very real fear that she would be deported. “To prevent Polly from being sent back to China as an alien, Bemis was married to her August 13, 1894 at Warrens.” And, as a result of “continued efforts by her husband,” Polly received her certificate of residence

## READER'S GUIDE

in 1896. There are no specific details about these efforts, but the photograph on Polly's certificate of residence appears to have been cropped from the full-length portrait that she said was her wedding photograph. Ironically, Idaho law at the time prohibited whites from marrying nonwhites, but the justice of the peace who performed the ceremony for Polly and Bemis, A. D. Smead, was himself a white married to a Sheepeater Indian.<sup>19</sup>

After their marriage, Polly and Bemis left for the Salmon River (popularly known as the River of No Return because it could only be navigated in one direction), where he had built a two-story house directly across from the river's Crooked Creek, seventeen or so miles by trail from Warrens.<sup>20</sup>

Periodically Bemis would return to Warrens to sell the produce they raised, check on his saloon, or play at a dance. Polly remained at the ranch to care for their cows, horses, chickens, ducks, and extensive garden and orchard. The canyon, thousands of feet deep, was mostly too steep for farming. For years, however, Chinese had been raising vegetables on terraced slopes near the South Fork to sell to mining camps in the vicinity. At the base of the canyon, Polly grew herbs for Lee Dick and Ah Kan in Warrens, but most of the tillable land was given over to cherries, pears, plums, grapes, blackberries, raspberries, chestnuts, mulberries, watermelons, clover, a variety of root vegetables (including purple potatoes), corn, and

## READER'S GUIDE

other garden truck, some of which the couple sold, much of which they gave away or fed to strangers and friends passing through.

Bemis, who refused money for ferrying folks across the river, would invite them to enjoy Polly's cooking and spend the night. Departing guests would be loaded down with pies, cakes, fruits, and vegetables to be delivered to old friends, or with delicacies for the sick. And in the winter, when the river was frozen over, "people would come down from Warrens to gamble and stay a few days because Polly's cooking was so good and her company too."<sup>21</sup>

The couple became renowned for their generous hospitality, but it was Polly's bright-eyed warmth and humor that people talked about most. She would take in those who were injured or ill and nurse them back to health. As pioneer John Carrey put it, "There was nobody in my day who carried the respect Polly earned through her kindness to everybody." Not surprisingly, the Bemis ranch soon became known as Polly's Place, and a government survey party named the creek running through the property for Polly in 1911.<sup>22</sup>

There are many stories of how Polly hoed while her husband fiddled, how she would come upon Bemis playing cribbage and order him to go fill her woodbox, how he would call her over to watch ants at work and she would tell him he would do better to emulate them. Her own hands seemed ever occupied with chores, making silk scarves, knitting, crochet-

## READER'S GUIDE

ing, even goldsmithing. While working in her garden, though, Polly would pick up worms and slip them into her apron pocket so that, without fail, she would be ready at three o'clock to go fishing. And, much as Bemis avoided physical labor, he filed a mining claim in February of 1899 in which he noted he had "opened new ground to the extent or depth of ten feet as required by the laws of Idaho."<sup>23</sup>

Polly loved animals and often made pets out of wild creatures. While still in Warrens, "she took a nest of baby robins and raised them, letting them come and go as they pleased. When they found fresh meat at a nearby market . . . they spent so much time there that a French clerk killed them. This made Polly very angry." But after Bemis's eyes dimmed, she, with her sharp eyes, would sight the animals for him to shoot. Once, when hunting, the two came across an orphaned cougar cub, and they brought it home for a pet. To the dismay of subsequent visitors, the cougar would sometimes leap on them as they approached the ranch. Visitors had to eat with the cougar, too, Polly having nailed its metal plate in place at the table. Only if the cougar began snarling would Polly—who could handle the cat even when it "got ugly"—take the animal outside.<sup>24</sup>

In 1909, Charlie Shepp purchased the ranch across the river. Later that year, his partner, Pete Klinkhamer, joined him from Buffalo Hump. Shepp was the gardener and carpenter, and he built a fine two-story house for them. Pete, who was much

## READER'S GUIDE

younger, took care of the stock and brought in cash by doing assessment work on mines for companies and individuals who wanted to keep their claims valid. He also made the six-day round-trip journey to Grangeville once a year to pick up necessities (sugar, coffee, tea, flour, lamp oil, and the like) for themselves and for Polly and Bemis.<sup>25</sup>

From Shepp's diary, we know that Bemis's health, never great, continued to deteriorate. By 1919, Bemis was bedridden, most likely with tuberculosis. Countess Gizycka, stopping at the ranch in July 1921, asked Polly where Bemis was, "and she said, 'Abed. He bin abed most two year now. He pletty closs, too. I gotta pack grub all time—all a time.'" But Polly clearly had not lost her sense of humor. For when Gizycka said, "'You'd better get another husband,' [to see how Polly would take it], she laughed, coy and amused. 'Yas, I tink so, too.'"<sup>26</sup>

Polly was illiterate. "When school come to Warren, I can't go," she explained. "I got to make money." So Shepp helped by writing away for seeds Polly wanted, glasses she needed, measuring her for a new dress that he sent for from Montgomery Ward. Shepp, Pete, and Polly also arranged a signal for when she and Bemis needed them: a dishtowel spread on a bush facing the river. Then Shepp and Pete strung a telephone line between the two ranches, and the neighbors spoke daily.<sup>27</sup>

At least one pioneer claimed, "No one, but no one, could fry fish and make biscuits like Polly," and she

## READER'S GUIDE

would boil squaw fish in a salted bag so that “the flesh just fell off the bones.” Her favorite fishing spot was at Crooked Creek on the Shepp Ranch side of the river. After Bemis was no longer strong enough to row Polly over, Shepp or Pete would come for her. And when the Bemis house caught fire in the summer of 1922, it was Shepp who helped Polly drag Bemis out to safety. With Pete away in Dixie, Polly and Shepp were unable to save the house or her dog, Teddy. Shepp noted in his diary that “everybody’s feet burned.” After Pete returned, he was able to round up thirty of Polly’s chickens; otherwise, they failed to save anything. But Polly had the gold buttons that Bemis had made her and which she moved from dress to dress, her certificate of residence, marriage certificate, and the mining claim. To me, the survival of these documents indicates the couple’s recognition of their importance for Polly.<sup>28</sup>

For the next two months, Polly and Bemis lived at Shepp Ranch. On October 29, 1922, Shepp wrote in his diary: “Bemis passed in at 3 a.m. I went up to War Eagle camp at 5 a.m. to get Schultz and Holmes. We buried the old man right after dinner.” A few days later, he noted: “Polly going to Warrens. Took her stuff over river. Pete went to Warrens with Polly.” Polly took her husband’s death very hard. And Pete later explained that he had taken Polly to Warrens because he and Shepp thought she would be happier among other Chinese.<sup>29</sup>

Warrens, completely rebuilt after a devastating

## READER'S GUIDE

fire in 1904, would have been unrecognizable to Polly. But she knew the name and date of birth of every child that had been born in the camp. And Bemis and Polly, while living in Warrens, had been “like father and mother” to at least one child, Taylor Smith, who had come to Warrens as a twelve-year-old. Now Polly took in six-year-old Gay Carrey to live with her.<sup>30</sup>

Like other children from outlying ranches, Gay and her brother, Johnny, had to board out while attending school in Warrens. “Polly took good care of me,” Gay recalled. “I loved her.” Since Polly’s cabin was tiny, Johnny stayed with Ethel Roden, who was running the hotel. But he visited his sister and Polly frequently. “I’d borrow a fiddle and walk up to Polly’s house. She was very appreciative. More so than anybody else in town. She would stop [whatever she was doing], sit down, and listen.” Her favorite tunes were “You’ve Got to Quit Kicking My Dog Around,” “Where Has My Little Dog Gone,” and “The Chinese Breakdown.”<sup>31</sup>

Polly was homesick in Warrens. One morning, Pete and Shepp woke to see smoke rising from Polly’s chicken house. Rowing across to investigate, they found that Polly had walked the seventeen miles from Warrens to offer them her property in exchange for their making it possible for her to come back and live in the canyon. Both men agreed, and Shepp began building a cabin immediately, but he didn’t finish it until 1924. Meanwhile, Polly remained in Warrens.<sup>32</sup>

## READER'S GUIDE

The cabin Shepp built for her—a single room with a sleeping loft—was on the site of the house Polly had shared with Bemis, where sunlight touches earliest in the morning and lingers longest in the evening. Shepp installed a cookstove and furnished the cabin with a bed, table, and chairs that he'd made. He and Pete reconnected the telephone line between the two homes, and the men did all the heavy work, chopping wood and bringing Polly game.

Polly and her neighbors exchanged daily telephone calls. When she failed to answer the phone on August 6, 1933, they rowed across the river and found her ill. Unable to care for her themselves, Shepp and Pete took her on horseback to the War Eagle Mine, where they were met by an ambulance that drove Polly to the Idaho County Nursing Home in Grangeville. She was said to be unconscious during the grueling, nine-hour journey.<sup>33</sup>

Polly had many visitors at the nursing home. And although Polly recognized she was “too tired, too old” to get well, she remained interested in life, especially in children.<sup>34</sup>

On November 6, 1933 at 3:30 in the afternoon, Polly died. She had wanted to be buried in the canyon she loved, but winter had set in, and neither Shepp nor Pete could be located. So, with members of the Grangeville City Council acting as pallbearers, Polly was buried in the Prairie View Cemetery. Before Shepp died in 1936, he signed everything over to his partner, and on December 8, 1936, Pete filed a U.S.

## READER'S GUIDE

Patent (#210249) for Polly's land. Pete donated what he had of Polly's belongings to St. Gertrude's Museum. He also shared what he knew of Polly with Sister Mary Alfreda and with Paul and Mary Filer, with whom he lived on Shepp Ranch for many years. After he died in 1970, his sister—who inherited his estate—purchased a stone for Polly's grave. The marker reads:

Polly Bemis  
September 11, 1853–November 6, 1933.<sup>35</sup>

### *Subsequent Discoveries*

After *Thousand Pieces of Gold* was published, readers who had known Polly sent me personal or family memories. There were also readers who directed me to additional sources or undertook new avenues of research themselves, then shared their discoveries with me.

More startling than any discovery about Polly in Idaho were revelations about her origins. The name Lalu Nathoy had always puzzled me because it does not sound Chinese. But many a Chinese name has been changed beyond recognition when transliterated from characters. Wondering whether there might be a different explanation, Tsoi Nuliang—the translator for *Thousand Pieces of Gold* in Guangzhou—wrote to a contact at Beijing University's Research

## READER'S GUIDE

Institute of Chinese Nationalities, who forwarded the inquiry to Huang Youfu in the Research Department on Northeastern and Inner Mongolian Nationalities. Huang recognized the name immediately: Lalu means either “Islam” or “long life” and Nathoy is pronounced *Nasoi*. Then, based on her name, her northern China origins, and a photograph of Lalu, Huang determined she was not Chinese but Mongolian, quite likely a Daur, a minority in Mongolia that is related culturally and linguistically to the Mongols and Tungus—Manchu-speaking peoples.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Huang explained, many Mongolians, previously nomadic, settled in Han areas to farm. Some of the settlers adopted Han customs, such as foot binding. When living among people who professed Islam, some even gave up the Mongolian faith, Lamaism, and became followers of Islam. This, Huang speculated, had been the case for Lalu's family. Regrettably, too many years had passed for him to find a precise location for Lalu's family. Nor could he ascertain how much, if any, of the Daur culture Lalu's family might have retained.<sup>36</sup>

The Daur wore buckskin tunics with pants and underclothes made of cotton. Their winter clothing included leather gloves, boots, and leggings. Their houses—sturdy, rectangular, one-story log structures—were considered ideally situated when there was a mountain rising behind them and a river flowing in front. They farmed grains, vegetables, and

## READER'S GUIDE

tobacco. They also fished and hunted bear and deer. A generous people, they would ostracize any hunter who did not share his kill, and strangers were always welcome.<sup>37</sup>

Familiarity with even a few of these characteristics would certainly explain the ease with which Polly seemed to have adapted to living in Idaho, her apparent alienation from most of the Chinese in Warrens, and her affection for her home in the Salmon River canyon. But was she, in fact, *Lalu Nathoy*?

In Polly's testimony for her deportation case in 1894, there is space for her signature, which has two characters that are difficult to decipher because the ink was blotted, yet they are written with a sure hand: 恭享, *Gung Heung*. Below these characters is the signature of W. A. Hall, U.S. Circuit Court Commissioner for the District of Idaho; it seems doubtful he would have permitted somebody else to sign on Polly's behalf. Besides, the calligraphy for "Gung Heung" does not match that of any other Chinese who gave testimony—some before W. A. Hall, others before A. Kavanaugh, justice of the peace in Warrens—at the same time as Polly.<sup>38</sup>

Given her background and the absence of any evidence to the contrary, I'd assumed she was illiterate in Chinese as well as English. But was she? When I revisited Polly's cabin in June 2001, I noticed two Chinese characters, 觀迎 (*welcome*), carved on a piece of wood above her door. The area, under an overhang,

## READER'S GUIDE

is dark, and I may have missed them during my visit in 1980. Or, they may have been added later. In any case, the first character, 觀, *gwoon*, should be 歡, *foon*. Despite this error, the calligraphy is well rendered.

Adding to the puzzle, Terrie Havis—who was showing me around the restored cabin—pointed out nine notches on a windowsill that were said to have been made by Polly, one for each year she lived there. I had not noticed these during my 1980 visit either. And if Polly was illiterate, she might well have made them. If she was literate, however, why would she have used such a crude method for marking time?

Regardless of who signed the two characters on Polly's testimony, why don't they sound out as any of her known names? A Mongolian living among Han Chinese might well have had both a Mongolian and a Chinese name—in which case Gung Heung could have been Lalu Nathoy's Chinese name, or Gung Heung might have been the name under which she was smuggled into America. According to Professor Marlon Hom, Gung Heung is a man's name, not a woman's. Does that mean she was smuggled in as a man?

Translator Tsoi Nuliang contends the characters were written by a man as a deliberate act of malice. “‘Heung’ means ‘enjoy’ (and) the sound ‘Gung’ can mean ‘public’ or ‘provide.’” Acknowledging that the

## READER'S GUIDE

character on the form is for a name, Tsoi maintains it was chosen for its sound, so “‘Gung Heung’ would mean the woman is ‘provided for public enjoyment,’ in other words, a prostitute.”<sup>39</sup>

### *Final Thoughts*

With imperfect records and memories and the virtual absence of her own voice, it seems unlikely that the facts of Lalu/Polly/Gung Heung’s life will ever be completely recovered or without contradictions. Her incredible spirit, which made her noteworthy in life and memorable in death, has never been contested, however. Not even by the new discoveries. And it was this spirit that I wanted to honor and attempted to convey in *Thousand Pieces of Gold*.

It was also this spirit that inspired Jim Campbell, when he owned the Polly Bemis Ranch, to bring her remains back to the canyon, restore her cabin, turn it into a museum, and nominate it for entry into the National Register of Historic Places. In 1987 the Department of the Interior deemed the cabin significant in Idaho’s heritage, and at the museum’s dedication ceremonies, Governor Cecil Andrus declared, “The history of Polly Bemis is a great part of the legacy of central Idaho. She is the foremost pioneer on the rugged Salmon River.”<sup>40</sup>

Although the Polly Bemis Ranch is privately owned, the seventy-one owner-members are committed to maintaining the cabin museum and keeping it

## READER'S GUIDE

open to the public. And Polly's spirit seems to linger—with characteristic good humor—in her cabin. In 1999 Kathy Schatz was struggling to reach a high shelf when she distinctly heard Polly say, "Ha ha! You short like me too."<sup>41</sup>

### Notes

1. In print since its publication in 1981, *Thousand Pieces of Gold* has been available from Boston's Beacon Press in trade paperback since 1988, and it has been translated into six languages. The title is a Chinese term of endearment for daughters.

2. Sister M. Alfreda Elsensohn, *Idaho Chinese Lore* (Cottonwood: The Idaho Corporation of Benedictine Sisters, 1970) (hereafter cited as *Chinese Lore*).

3. Countess Eleanor Gizycka, "Diary on the Salmon River, Part II," *Field and Stream*, June 1923 (hereafter cited as "Diary"); "Woman of 70 Sees Railway First Time," *Idaho County Free Press*, August 16, 1923 (hereafter cited as *Free Press*); *The Idaho Statesman*, August 8, 1924, reprinted August 8, 1954 (hereafter cited as *Statesman*); Lamont Johnson, "Old China Woman of Idaho Famous," *Oregonian*, November 5, 1933 (hereafter cited as *Oregonian*).

*Note:* Since I was writing a novel, I did not copy down page numbers when taking notes, and my notes from Sister Mary Alfreda Elsensohn's letters, articles, and books sometimes simply reference "Elsensohn." These decisions, made over twenty years ago, now make for incomplete footnotes, and for this I apologize.

4. This is the date on Polly's tombstone. If Lalu did arrive in Warrens in 1872 and was eighteen when sold and nineteen when landed, she would indeed have been born in 1853. On Polly's 1896

## READER'S GUIDE

certificate of residence, however, her age is forty-seven, making the year of her birth 1849.

5. Johnson, *Oregonian*; Gizycka, "Diary."

6. Sister M. Alfreda Elsensohn, *Pioneer Days in Idaho County*, vol.1 (Cottonwood: The Idaho Corporation of Benedictine Sisters, 1947) (hereafter cited as *Pioneer*); Eileen Hubbell Macdonald, "A Study of Chinese Migrants in Certain Idaho Settlements and of Selected Families in Transition" (master's thesis, University of Idaho, 1966) (hereafter cited as "Study"); Johnson, *Oregonian*; Elsensohn, *Chinese Lore*.

7. Lucie Cheng Hirata, "Free, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 1 (1979) (hereafter cited as "Free, Indentured") and "Chinese Immigrant Women in Nineteenth-Century California," in *Women of America*, eds. C. R. Berkin and M. B. Norton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979).

8. Iris Anderson, "Life at Warren Today Is Shared with Ghost of Her Colorful Mining Days," *Lewiston Morning Tribune*, September 4, 1960 (hereafter cited as "Life at Warren"); G. M. Campbell, "A Chinese Slave Girl Charmed an Idaho Town," *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 9, 1972 (hereafter cited as *Tribune*); Elsensohn.

9. George J. Bancroft, "China Polly (Lalu Nathoy): A Reminiscence" (unpublished typescript, Denver Public Library) (hereafter cited as "Reminiscence"); Louise Cheney, "China Polly Was a Pioneer" (Idaho Historical Society) (hereafter cited as "China Polly"); Grace Roffey Pratt, "Charlie Bemis's Highest Prize," *Frontier Times* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1961) (hereafter cited as *Frontier*); Campbell, *Tribune*; Elsensohn; *Free Press*.

*Note:* Gizycka's claim that Polly said an old Chinese man brought her to Warrens seems implausible because running a pack train that carried supplies was physically demanding work

## READER'S GUIDE

performed by young men. For this and other reasons, I created Jim, the packer, in my novel. (See my article, "Reclaiming Chinese America: One Woman's Journey," *Amerasia Journal* 26:1, p. 167).

Although all sources on Lalu's arrival in Warrens seem to stem from the eyewitness account of pioneer A. W. Talkington, one of Elsensohn's several reconstructions has Lalu arriving with two other Chinese girls, a claim also made by Otis Morris and George Bancroft, neither of whom was present. Since the one Chinese woman in the 1870 census might have been gone by the time Lalu arrived, I opted in my novel for Lalu to arrive alone and be the only Chinese woman in Warrens.

All sources using the name with which Polly arrived, Lalu, and the name of her owner, Hong King, seem to originate from Elsensohn. Having failed to ask for her source while she was living, I can only speculate that she got this information from Talkington as well. The name Nathoy appears on Polly's marriage certificate.

10. Elsensohn, *Pioneer*; Bancroft, "Reminiscence"; Mary Long Eisenhower, letter to the author, October 8, 1980.

11. Elsensohn; Bancroft, "Reminiscence"; Taylor Smith, preface to "Original Music Manuscript," by Peter Beemer (Idaho Historical Society, November 2, 1961); interview with John Carrey, July 18, 1980; John Carrey, letter to the author, September 15, 1980.

*Note:* In *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, Bemis's background only comes up during an exchange about freedom on p. 144, where Polly refers to Bemis as being the son of a doctor and having worked as a deckhand. The former came from Fern Cable Trull, "The History of the Chinese in Idaho from 1864–1910" (master's thesis, University of Oregon, 1946) (hereafter cited as "History");

## READER'S GUIDE

the latter came from Robert G. Bailey, *River of No Return* (Lewiston, Idaho: Bailey-Blake Printing Co., 1935) (hereafter cited as *River*).

12. Betty Derig, "Celestials in the Diggings," *Idaho Yesterdays*, Fall 1972 (hereafter cited as "Celestials"); Macdonald, "Study"; Trull, "History"; Elsensohn.

13. Elsensohn; Cheney, "China Polly"; Gizycka, "Diary"; Pratt, *Frontier*; interview with Vera Weaver Waite, July 15, 1980; Verna McGrane, letter to the author, August 24, 1980; interviews with John Carrey and Gay Carrey Robie, July 18, 1980; *Free Press*; Johnson, *Oregonian*; Polly's dresses in the Polly Bemis Collection, The Historical Museum at St. Gertrude, Cottonwood, Idaho; Gizycka, "Diary"; Johnson, *Oregonian*; Bancroft, "Reminiscence."

14. Bertha Long, "Polly Bemis—My Friend" (typescript written for Clara Landrus, a niece in late 1930s, in possession of author) (hereafter cited as "Friend"); *Statesman*; Elsensohn; Campbell, *Tribune*; *Free Press*; interviews with John Carrey and Gay Carrey Robie, July 18, 1980; interview with Vera McGrane, July 20, 1980; interview with Vera Weaver Waite, July 15, 1980; Denis Long, letter to the author, September 18, 1980.

15. Elsensohn; Trull, "History"; "Polly Bemis, 'Poker Bride' of Salmon River County, Expires," *Lewiston Tribune*, November 7, 1933 (hereafter cited as "Expires"); Pratt, *Frontier*; Cheney, "China Polly"; Trull, "History"; Hirata, "Free, Indentured"; Campbell, *Tribune*.

16. Elsensohn; Johnson, *Oregonian*; Bancroft, "Reminiscence"; *Free Press*; *Idaho County Free Press*, August 16, 1923 and September 26, 1890; Campbell, *Tribune*; Denis Long, letter to the author, September 18, 1980.

17. John Carrey, letter to the author, December 9, 1980; An-

## READER'S GUIDE

derson, "Life at Warren"; Elsensohn; Bancroft, "Reminiscence"; "Mountain Notes," *Idaho County Free Press*, October 24, 1890; Johnson, *Oregonian*; Campbell, *Tribune*.

18. *Free Press*; Polly Nathoy and C. A. Bemis, Certificate of Marriage, August 13, 1894, The Historical Museum at St. Gertrude, Cottonwood, Idaho.

19. Interview with Gay Carrey Robie, July 18, 1980; Ann Adams, "The Legend of Polly Bemis Retold," an undated, unattributed article that quotes extensively from the *Idaho County Free Press* and may actually be from that newspaper; John Carrey, "Moccasin Tracks of the Sheepeater" in *Sheepeater Indian Campaign* (Grangeville: Idaho County Free Press, 1968); Polly Bemis, 1896 certificate of residence, The Historical Museum at St. Gertrude; Johnson, *Oregonian*; Campbell, *Tribune*; Elsensohn.

20. Johnny Carrey and Cort Conley, *River of No Return* (Cambridge, Idaho: Backeddy Books, 1978) (hereafter cited as *No Return*); Elsensohn, *Polly Bemis*; Bob J. Waite, letter to the author, May 29, 1980.

21. John Carrey, letters to the author, September 15, 1980, December 9, 1980; Trull, "History"; *Free Press*; Johnson, *Oregonian*; Carrey and Conley, *No Return*; Bailey, *River*; Bancroft, "Reminiscence"; Elsensohn; interview with Mary and Paul Filer, July 20, 1980.

22. John Carrey, letters to the author, September 15, 1980, November 21, 1980, December 9, 1980; Bailey, *River*; Bancroft, "Reminiscence."

23. John Carrey, letter to the author, December 9, 1980; Mary Long Eisenhower, letter to the author, October 8, 1980; Carrey and Conley, *No Return*; Trull, "History"; Elsensohn; Bancroft, "Reminiscence"; Placer Location #522, Idaho County Records.

24. Johnson, *Oregonian*; Gizycka, "Diary"; interview with John

## READER'S GUIDE

Carrey, July 18, 1980; John Carrey, letter to the author, November 21, 1980; Elsensohn, "Memories."

25. Interview with John Carrey, July 18, 1980; interview with John Carrey, Paul Filer, and Mary Filer, July 20, 1980; Carrey and Conley, *No Return*.

26. Elsensohn; Gizycka, "Diary."

27. *Free Press*; Elsensohn; Inez Wildman, letter to the author, September 16, 1980.

28. Inez Wildman, letter to the author, September 16, 1980; interview with Mary and Paul Filer, July 20, 1980; Carrey and Conley, *No Return*; Elsensohn.

29. Elsensohn, *Chinese Lore*; Johnson, *Oregonian*; interview with Mary and Paul Filer, July 20, 1980.

30. Elsensohn, *Polly Bemis*; *Free Press*.

31. Interview with John Carrey and Gay Carrey Robie, July 18, 1980; John Carrey, letter to the author, November 21, 1980.

32. Interview with John Carrey, July 18, 1980; interview with Mary and Paul Filer, July 20, 1980; Frances Zaunmiller Wisner, "Simply River Women," *Incredible Idaho*, Spring 1972, vol. 3, no. 4 (The Idaho Department of Commerce and Development); Elsensohn; Carrey and Conley, *No Return*.

33. Interview with John Carrey, July 18, 1980; Johnson, *Oregonian*; Elsensohn, *Polly Bemis*; "Expires."

34. Long, "Friend"; Johnson, *Oregonian*; Elsensohn; Mary Long Eisenhower, letter to the author, December 8, 1980.

35. "Expires"; interview with John Carrey, July 18, 1980; Elsensohn; Mary Long Eisenhower, letter to the author, December 8, 1980; interview with Paul and Mary Filer, July 20, 1980.

36. Tsoi Nuliang, letter to the author, June 27, 1984; Tsoi Nuliang, translation of letter from Huang Youfu to Tsoi Nuliang, October 1, 1984.

## READER'S GUIDE

37. *Daur Folk Tales: Selected Myths of the Daur Nationality*, trans. Mark Bender and Su Huana (Beijing: New World Press, 1984).

38. *United States v. Polly Bemiss* [sic].

*Note:* Since I am illiterate in Chinese, I could not read the characters myself and I am indebted to Marlon Hom, Wei Chi Poon, You Shan Tang, Tsoi Nuliang, Ellen Lai-shan Yeung, and Judy Yung for their help. Because of the blotted ink, the characters were read differently by the individuals listed here. "Gung Heung" was the most frequent reading.

39. Tsoi Nuliang, email to author, October 16, 2001.

40. Associated Press, "Old Cabin Becomes Museum," June 6, 1987; Alice Koskela, "Polly Bemis finally rests at homestead," *Star-News*, June 10, 1987, 1; Bill Loftus, "Salmon River Museum Dedicated to Pioneer Polly Bemis," *Lewiston Tribune*, June 6, 1987, 6A.

41. Conversation with the author, June 28, 2001.

42. This essay is adapted from an article originally printed in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 24, no. 1 (2003), published by the University of Nebraska Press.



### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In chapter 8, Ding says to Lalu, “Don’t you understand, you cannot escape your fate?” (p. 77). How does this book embody the debate on predestination vs. free will?
2. Discuss the various meanings behind the title *Thousand Pieces of Gold*. Do you think it is an appropriate title for this book?
3. Do you think the author presents a realistic portrait of race relations in a small yet polarized nineteenth-century American community? How about the role of women in a largely male community?
4. “For the Gold Mountains they had described was not the America she would know. This: the dingy basement room, the blank faces of women and girls stripped of hope, the splintered boards beneath her feet, the auction block. This was her America.” (p. 102). This small passage touches upon the idea of the American Dream and how reality is often very different from the way immigrants imagined life would

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- be. Do you think immigrants still experience these same feelings in America today?
5. During the course of the book, Lulu/Polly's status changes from that of a daughter to a slave to a free woman. What events and character traits help facilitate these transformations?
6. What limitations did Lulu/Polly face as a Chinese woman living in nineteenth-century America?
7. Explore Lulu/Polly's relationships with other Chinese in Warrens and what, besides her gender, might have had an impact on them.
8. Compare Lulu/Polly's relationships with Ding, Jim, and Charlie. Discuss the similarities and differences.
9. Charlie tells Polly that a Chinese person in America cannot own land. Considering Polly's love of farming and the land, does she ever accept this concept? Give examples of her defiance and perseverance.
10. Discuss Charlie and Polly's relationship. In what ways was it atypical of relationships of that era?
11. Discuss the daily discrimination Lulu faced in China and how it differed from the discrimination she faced in America.

## *DISCUSSION QUESTIONS*

12. In what ways does the enslavement of women continue in America and around the world today?

13. In the nineteenth century, some Chinese women bound their feet while some Western women bound their waists with corsets. How do women today alter their bodies to achieve an idealized appearance?



Ruthanne Lum McCunn, a Eurasian of Chinese and Scottish descent, has published eight books on the experiences of Chinese people on both sides of the Pacific, including *Wooden Fish Songs*, *Sole Survivor: A Story of Record Endurance at Sea*, *Chinese American Portraits: Personal Histories 1828–1988*, and, most recently, *The Moon Pearl*. Her award-winning books have been translated into nine languages and adapted for stage and screen. A former teacher, she currently resides in San Francisco and lectures extensively at universities, schools, and community organizations.